

P+P+P=Success

People ... Places ... Process

2003 Hunting Season

By Randy Kreil

As I write this article it is the last Saturday of June and we're in the beginning stages of putting together details of our 2003-05 biennial budget. Somewhat of a daunting task for people who would much rather be counting ducks and pheasant broods than deciphering the difference between capital assets and capital improvements. Much of late, North Dakota Game and Fish Department personnel have spent time manipulating formulas that drive our budget spreadsheets.

So, as I contemplated writing this article, I had a hard time getting the concept of formulas out of my head. Then it occurred to me that we really have a "formula" for everything we do in life.

Think about it for a minute. When you are deciding if you need to mow your lawn, the formula is the height of grass added to the time you have to invest, divided by the neighborhood tolerance limit. Another example is when you are making a decision on whether to refinance your home. The formula will include such things as your current interest rate, new interest rate, time left on the loan, costs associated with refinancing, and how much spending cash you want after making your monthly mortgage payment.

You get the idea.

A successful hunting season could also have a formula. Each person's formula may be slightly different, but I would bet they all would contain the three Ps – People, Places and Process. Most avid hunters will tell you the basic enjoyment associated with hunting is not in getting a daily limit in the shortest amount of time. Instead, it is in the people you are with, places you go, and the process you use to hunt. Let's take a closer look at each of these components of a successful hunting season.

To some hunters, an important ingredient to a successful hunt includes a drop-dead gorgeous locale. If the badlands in western North Dakota is in your plans this autumn, then the outlook for the fall hunting seasons look promising.

Photo Omitted

People

We all realize the importance of people when it comes to a successful hunting season. This not only includes friends and family, but also the many accommodating and friendly private landowners who allow you to hunt. Hunting can be a very social event involving a dozen people or more. Some families or groups of friends use hunting as a means to keep connected in these changing times, when people are moving to larger cities or even out of state. Other people are more comfortable with a small, closely-knit group of hunting companions. Many life-long friendships have grown out of finding just the right hunting partner. These partnerships thrive on sharing experiences, long and thoughtful conversations, and special memories that last a lifetime.

For other people, hunting is also a time of soul-searching solitude. Spending time alone in the outdoors and fresh air with a good dog and nothing else but your own thoughts, can provide a quiet respite from the stresses of everyday life.

Places

Most people who are serious about hunting have a mental checklist of places they enjoy visiting. The hunting season wouldn't be complete without a walk through the badlands canyon where you missed a huge mule deer buck or along a familiar trail in a Turtle Mountain aspen forest where your partner had that once-in-a-lifetime double on ruffed grouse. Many of these places have yielded successful hunts year-after-year, while others offered an impressive prairie vista or simply a sunny hillside protected from the wind that made for a good place to take an afternoon nap. They are strange, yet comfortable surroundings that make us feel closer to the natural world and remind us about the irreplaceable value of wild places.

We seem to go out of our way to visit these places in an effort to rekindle the special memories associated with these familiar haunts. How many times have you

laughed about driving by thousands of sharp-tailed grouse just to get to that particular piece of native prairie – the one with the lichen-covered glacial boulders and a buffaloberry patch – where your dog retrieved its first grouse? Have you ever gone back and walked to the exact spot where you shot that one extra special white-tailed buck and then replayed the event, detail by detail, in your mind? If you have, then you understand the value of these special places. If you haven't, try it sometime. It will be worth the trip.

Process

The basic idea behind hunting is to shoot an animal, retrieve it, bring it home, and eat it. This might be referred to as the “product” and it could easily be considered the fourth P in the formula. While “product” may be the tangible objective, most hunters will tell you that the “process” of how you get the “product” is actually more important.

A case in point is pheasant hunting. With our state's current high pheasant population, a person could simply drive around on prairie trails and, if they found enough open land, could sooner or later shoot a limit of roosters. While there is no doubt this approach is used and enjoyed by some hunters, many others wouldn't even consider it. Their idea of a pheasant hunt is allowing their dogs to work for a few hours, get some needed exercise for themselves, before filling out their bag limit. These folks will tell you this is how they define a rewarding pheasant hunt and, as an added bonus, earn the respect of private landowners for not road hunting.

Duck hunting provides another example of how process can be important. When I was a teen-ager growing up in Devils Lake in the mid-1970s, we hunted ducks the old fashioned North Dakota way. We “slough jumped” and it worked well. All you needed was one person with a pair of waders to retrieve the birds you shot after a successful sneak. No one had decoys, duck boat, or even a dog that could retrieve, so we made due with what we had. After college when I moved to Bismarck, I met a transplanted Cheesehead from Wisconsin and eventually my current hunting partner who grew up hunting waterfowl out of a boat in Minnesota. Both opened my eyes to the

thrill of hunting ducks over decoys and I haven't done any slough jumping since.

This kind of duck hunting requires serious work, which defines the “process” aspect of our hunting formula. You need to find a marsh with ducks in the area, a place with a firm bottom to set up decoys, proper water depth, good cover or blind material, the right weather conditions such as wind direction and cloud cover, decoys, waders, camouflage clothing, duck calls, dog, lunch, coffee, binoculars, camera, the right steel shot loads for the conditions and location, maybe a boat, and the willingness to haul all this – and a limit of ducks and a giant Canada goose or two – out once you're done.

I can think of many occasions where all this work netted only a few ducks, if any, and lots of sore muscles. But the sight of a

prairie sunrise, sounds of an awakening marsh, and being with others who relish having the chance to participate in the process, made it all worth it.

Our game management biologists have put together the following outlooks for this fall's hunting seasons. Take the time to read through each report and think about how you would apply the simple formula: People + Places + Process = Success. How does it work for you? Who are the people, where are the places, and what is the process you're looking forward to for the 2003 hunting season?

Finally, remember to slow down and enjoy the experience, be safe, respect private land and landowners, be careful with fire, and never underestimate the contribution that wildlife and wild places make to our quality of life.

2003 FALL OUTLOOK

Hungarian Partridge

Gerald Kobriger

*Upland Game Management Supervisor,
Dickinson*

The Pat, or Hungarian partridge, is not back. It has been 10 years since the crash in partridge numbers, but the reason for the slow rebound is unknown. While the population has exhibited normal fluctuations the past few years, this dramatic decline has meant an extremely low population when compared with 10, 20, or even 30 years ago. But this little bird, a favorite of many hunters, has a high reproductive potential and may break out any year. Tales of the spread of this species after initial introductions years ago are almost unbelievable. Maybe it can happen again.

Rural mail carriers count partridge for the Department as they travel over North Dakota back roads. This spring, cooperating carriers covered nearly 62,000 miles in a three-day period. Their partridge count in April was the highest since 1993, and was up more than 20 percent from last year. This increase is undoubtedly a reflection of good production the last two years. Mild winters have helped annual survival, so partridge may at last have their foot in the door.

The hunting season last year was the best in a number of years. Partridge harvest was

up 35 percent from 2001, and the wing sample rose nearly 50 percent.

While numbers are still low, conditions may be right for a continued comeback. A mild winter, followed by good precipitation that has promoted vegetative growth, has provided good cover for partridge.

Sharp-tailed Grouse

Gerald Kobriger

Writing the fall season outlook in early summer is kind of like being a Chicago Cubs fan. On opening day, the Cubs are in first place, but it can be another story come fall.

In June, a person can be very optimistic about the fall upland game seasons. The spring census has been completed, populations are up, moisture is good, cover is improving, and a bountiful crop seems assured. But you still have to play the games.

Actually, the sharp-tailed situation in North Dakota has great potential this year. Of the 22 areas where dancing grouse were counted this spring, only one had a decrease from the previous year, and that decrease was just 6 percent. All other areas had increases ranging from 4 to 70 percent. Statewide, the increase was more than 30 percent, up from a 22 percent increase the previous spring. The winter was mild, so grouse survival was excellent, and wet con-

ditions this spring produced good nesting and brood habitat. However, residual cover important for grouse nesting was short in some areas. Warm temperatures eventually arrived to likely jumpstart an insect crop vital for survival of newly-hatched chicks.

To review a little from 2002, the breeding population was up and production was improved from the previous year. The number of broods observed last summer was up more than 25 percent, and average brood size increased from 5.9 to 7.0 chicks per brood. The hunting season last fall was good in most areas, except for the south central portion of the state which was hit by extreme drought and extensive prairie fires. The 2002 harvest was higher than 2001, up about 10 percent, although grouse-per-hunter and grouse-per-trip were not significantly different between

the two years.

The number of resident hunters increased about 10 percent last fall, reversing a two-year trend, while nonresident hunters continued to climb. The number of wings sent in by hunters last fall was up 25 percent over the previous year, another indication of a good season.

Conditions are right to have a better season this year.

Sage Grouse

Gerald Kobriger

Sage grouse are hanging tough. Even though they may be a minor species in both numbers and harvest in North Dakota, they are hunted by a small, dedicated resident and nonresident contingent. What better place than southwest North Dakota to spend an early autumn

afternoon hiking across a seemingly endless sagebrush flat in pursuit of a true trophy bird?

North Dakota does not have a large sage grouse population like Montana or Wyoming, but hunters are able to harvest a few of these giant birds without harming the population. When North Dakota resumed hunting seasons a number of years ago, weights of a number of sage grouse were taken and adult males averaged 5 1/2 pounds. It is the largest North American grouse species.

Sage grouse are good table fare, despite the rumors. Take it from President Theodore Roosevelt who said "... it is commonly believed that the flesh of the sage fowl is uneatable, this is very far from being the truth; on the contrary, it is excellent eating in September ..."

Over the past eight years, hunters have averaged from .25 to .50 birds per hunter. Department personnel did check a few more birds last year than the previous year, and the percentage of young birds harvested increased, indicating better production. Sage grouse counts this spring did show a few more birds than last year, which is always good news. The sage grouse range has had good precipitation this year, which should help production. Indications are the 2003 hunting season will be very similar to previous years.

Ring-necked Pheasants

Lowell Tripp

Upland Game Bird Biologist, Oakes

Following another favorable winter, North Dakota pheasant hunters can look forward to an excellent hunting season in 2003. Winter mortality was minimal, and as a result, the spring breeding population showed good increases throughout pheasant range. Spring weather conditions were also conducive to good nesting success.

Reproduction and survival of young birds was not known by early summer, but if it is average, pheasants will be found in high numbers.

The Game and Fish Department's PLOTS program has been successful throughout our best pheasant range by providing access to good hunting areas. Last fall, hunters bagged more than 500,000 ring-necked pheasants. That is the highest harvest in the state in more than 50 years. Total number of hunters in 2002 was close to 79,000. This high harvest can be attributed to excellent winter weather during the

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past four or five years and good cover on private land.

Look for excellent pheasant hunting this fall in south central and southeastern North Dakota. Pheasants will also be plentiful all along the Missouri River System and anywhere south of Interstate 94.

Wild Turkeys

Lowell Tripp

Hunters who drew a fall North Dakota wild turkey license can anticipate a great season. Excellent winter weather and successful reproduction has increased the state's turkey population to record levels.

Last fall, 6,752 wild turkey licenses were issued to North Dakota residents, and 5,234 hunters harvested 3,157 birds for a success of 60.3 percent. This was not a record harvest, but the number of licenses issued was a record. Turkey licenses are issued by lottery with the number of licenses issued in each unit determined by the wild turkey population.

Because of the high wild turkey population, a significant change was made for the 2003 fall hunting season. For the first time, the entire state is open to turkey hunting. Many of North Dakota's turkey units have been expanded and new units have been created.

North Dakota's wild turkey population has been on the climb, and the hope is to harvest some of these birds, reducing depredation problems on private lands.

Ducks and Geese

Mike Johnson

Game Management Section Leader

The number of breeding ducks in North Dakota this year was down from last year, but 2002 numbers were likely inflated because Game and Fish Department surveys were conducted when lots of ducks were unsettled or had yet to migrate through the state – meaning they were in North Dakota when the survey was taken, but probably wound up nesting somewhere else – likely Canada.

Still, the number of breeding ducks counted this spring is double the average since 1948. Mallard numbers were fourth highest on record and 187 percent above the long-term average. All duck species, except green-winged teal, pintail and canvasback, showed numbers above the long-term average.

Thanks to spring and early-summer rains, duck brood water was improved in

many areas, and nesting cover was good. Production is expected to be above average in North Dakota this year, and habitat is improved in prairie Canada as precipitation finally returned to that area.

Resident Canada goose numbers in North Dakota remain high, up 24 percent according to Department surveys.

The number of waterfowl hunters in North Dakota was down 2 percent in 2002 to 64,130 hunters, or 34,138 residents and 29,992 nonresidents. The duck harvest last year was up 27 percent – 550,235 ducks – and the goose harvest down 13 percent – 220,607 geese.

Based on hunter reports, more than 280,000 mallards were bagged in 2002, while more than 165,000 Canada geese

were harvested. A downward trend in the fall snow goose harvest – blamed on the light geese staying in Canada longer – continued with just 51,400 birds being bagged. In 1997, for example, hunters in North Dakota shot 163,000 snow geese.

There was a time snow geese made up the majority of the geese harvested in North Dakota in the fall, but that's changed. In 2002, 72 percent of the birds shot were Canada geese and just 25 percent were snow geese.

Additionally, 26,000 birds were taken during the 2002 early Canada goose season. While about 11,000 birds were harvested during the 2003 spring light goose season in North Dakota, up from the 6,400-plus snow geese shot in 2002.

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Sandhill Cranes

Stan Kohn, Migratory Game Bird Biologist

The mid-continent population of sandhill cranes has been relatively stable since the early 1980s, and birds now show up over much of the state. Because of this, Game and Fish opened an experimental sandhill crane season in 2001 east of U.S. Highway 281. This area, open again this fall, has a restricted season of 37 days and a bag limit of two birds, while a 58-day season and a three-bird bag is available in the remainder of the state.

The best guess about the fall flight of sandhill cranes through North Dakota is that bird numbers will be similar to last year. Cranes have been migrating into North Dakota later each fall so the season has been adjusted to coincide with the migration. Department personnel will continue to measure harvested birds for subspecies composition and will monitor harvest of large sandhill cranes, which are not as abundant as lesser sandhill cranes.

Mourning Doves

Stan Kohn

For those sportsmen who want to begin the hunting season early, mourning doves provide an exciting challenge, and they taste good, too.

Typically, mourning dove numbers are highest the first part of September in North Dakota when the season opens. However, doves migrate out of the state early due to weather changes, and most are gone by late September. So, it is important to get out early and often after the season opens September 1.

Historically, North Dakota and Kansas often have the highest average spring dove counts in the nation. However, recent spring surveys show the breeding population of mourning doves has been declining.

A special mourning dove banding project was initiated in the Central Flyway this summer. Silver leg bands were placed on doves captured in North Dakota in July and August. Hunters need to carefully check the

legs of all doves shot this fall and report any silver bands found on birds. Band numbers can be reported directly to the Bird Banding Lab at 800-327-2263 or reported to the Game and Fish Department at 701-328-6300.

Tundra Swans

Stan Kohn

Interest in swan hunting remains high in the state. The eastern population of tundra swans remains above management objectives and sportsmen can expect to see good numbers of birds migrating through the state in October.

North Dakota's allotment of swan tags increased to 2,200 in 2003, or 200 more than last year. The number of hunters applying for swan tags – 2,142 applicants in 2002 – also continues to rise. Hunter success has remained around 45-50 percent with 80 percent of successful applicants actively hunting each year. The counties with the highest harvest in 2002 include McLean, Kidder, Stutsman, Pierce and Ramsey.

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White-tailed Deer

Bill Jensen, Big Game Management Biologist

Mild late-winter conditions and a favorable spring bode well for North Dakota's white-tailed deer herd in the eastern two-thirds of the state. These trends, however, are not universal across the state.

White-tailed deer harvest rates were low in some badlands hunting units in 2002, and winter surveys suggest stable deer numbers in the northwestern corner of the state. Despite these regional depressions in deer numbers, many hunting units are above management goals. As a result, the state made available a record 123,475 deer-gun licenses for this fall. Nearly the entire increase is made up of antlerless licenses.

Hunters may be eligible for up to four deer-gun licenses this fall. These licenses may be used during the archery and muzzle-loader seasons as long as they are used in the unit, and for the type of deer stated on the license. North Dakota regulations allow deer hunting early, late, and often. If your family cannot eat several adult deer, consider harvesting young-of-the-year since this segment of the population is the most likely to have problems during a hard winter. And there is arguably no finer game meat west of New York City than a young-of-the-year whitetail.

Mule Deer

*Bruce Stillings, Big Game Biologist,
Dickinson*

North Dakota's mule deer population has increased slightly since the mid 1990s, and results from fall and spring surveys indicate that animals in the badlands continue to do well.

The 2002 fall mule deer survey showed good production with 93 fawns per 100 does, and a healthy buck-to-doe ratio of 39 bucks per 100 does. The 2003 spring mule deer index was up 7 percent from 2002, and 20 percent higher than the long-term average.

Mule deer hunters had a successful 2002 season. Hunter success for antlered mule deer was 78 percent and 81 percent for does. In response to the increased number of mule deer, hunters will have more opportunities this fall. While maintaining a conservative harvest strategy, licenses were increased by 350 to 5,225 for the 2003 season.

Moose

Roger Johnson, Big Game Supervisor, Devils Lake

The 2003 moose season should be similar to 2002 when 134 hunters harvested 104 moose for a 78 percent success rate. Limited snow prevented a complete winter aerial survey, but the Turtle Mountain survey showed a decrease in moose numbers.

License numbers were decreased in the Turtle Mountains, but this is offset by a continually increasing moose population on the prairie. The number of licenses in Unit M10 increased because of more moose in the area. Hunter success can vary depending on crop harvest when moose season opens, especially row crops on the prairie.

Elk

Roger Johnson

The number of elk licenses increased from 216 in 2002 to 236 in 2003. The increase is in Unit E1 in northeastern North Dakota where landowners feel there are getting to be too many elk.

The 216 hunters in 2002 harvested 91 elk for hunter success of 45 percent. That's similar to recent years, but down from historical hunter success rates. Elk may be harder to hunt because of increased hunting pressure. Hunters can expect success similar to 2002

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Pronghorn

Bruce Stillings

Pronghorn populations have slowly increased since the hard winter of 1996-97. Following last year's mild winter and a wet spring, biologists are optimistic pronghorn populations will continue to recover across western North Dakota.

According to Department estimates from a summer survey that covered 15,218 square miles, the statewide pronghorn population is up 57 percent from 2002. A total of 16 gun and archery hunting units are open for pronghorn this fall, two more than last year.

Pronghorn hunters had good luck in 2002, as 844 hunters harvested 694 pronghorn. Interest in pronghorn archery hunting remains high, as 1,087 pronghorn archery tags were sold in 2002. Hunter success was about 16 percent. McKenzie and Billings counties are most popular for pronghorn archers.

Bighorn Sheep

Brett Wiedmann, Bighorn Sheep Biologist, Dickinson

The 2003 season should produce good hunting opportunities for the four bighorn sheep license holders, as North Dakota's sheep range north of Interstate 94 holds a

good number of mature rams. The bighorn population south of I-94 continues to show improvement, however, numbers are still too low to warrant a hunting season.

In 2002, the Game and Fish Department issued four bighorn sheep licenses and all hunters were successful. One license was auctioned by the Minnesota-Wisconsin Chapter of the Foundation for North American Wild Sheep for \$32,000, with all proceeds being used for management of North Dakota's bighorns.

This year has excellent potential for lamb production and recruitment, as 32 lambs were observed in mid-June. While sure-footed and able to elude most predators at that stage in their young lives, their next hurdle is the weaning process in fall. Many lambs succumb to disease after being weaned because they no longer receive antibodies and nutrients from their mother's milk. If many of this year's remaining lambs survive, it will be in addition to last year's high recruitment of 29 lambs.

In January 2003, 26 bighorns were relocated from Oregon to two sites in North Dakota – Kendley Plateau and Buckhorn Creek. (Kendley Plateau is now the official name for what many North Dakotans know as "Kinley" Plateau, south of Medora.) The sheep released at Kendley Plateau dis-

persed somewhat, with half remaining near the release site and half joining nearby herds. The sheep near Buckhorn Creek, located north of I-94, have remained near the release site and were observed this summer with four lambs, which is encouraging.

Bighorn sheep transplanted from a northern herd to the southern population in the winter of 2001-02 continue to do well. Both herds recruited four lambs in 2002, and both were observed with a high number of lambs in 2003.

Furbearers

Jacquie Ermer, Furbearer Biologist

Spring survey data indicate coyote populations have increased statewide, while fox populations have increased in the eastern portion of the state and decreased slightly in western regions. Despite affects of mange, coyotes continue to expand their range within the state. Spring survey data also indicate muskrat populations are down, especially in the Drift Prairie region, while raccoon populations are up in the Missouri Coteau and Drift Prairie.

With pelt prices remaining nearly the same as last year, and spring surveys indicating stable to increasing populations for most furbearers, harvest is expected to be similar to last season. The fur market outlook for next season looks promising even though the last sale came up short for coyotes. Demand for wild fur is actually up, although supply is short.

Many trappers and predator hunters likely spent more time afield this past season to achieve their harvest of furbearers. Overall, harvest of most furbearing species increased from last season, including coyote, raccoon, badger and skunk.

Bobcat harvest was down slightly from the previous season, even though prices for bobcat furs remain high. Muskrat harvest was down this past season. Mange is still prevalent in North Dakota fox and coyote, but healthy animals are being seen statewide.

RANDY KREIL is the Game and Fish Department's wildlife division chief.

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NONRESIDENT HUNTING CHANGES

Nonresidents planning to hunt in North Dakota should take note of changes made by lawmakers during the 2003 legislative session, including alterations in hunting season structure and licensing requirements.

Following is a look at the changes:

Nonresident Waterfowl Licenses –

Nonresident waterfowl hunters no longer need a small game license. What used to be a \$10 add-on to the small game license is now an \$85 independent license. The nonresident waterfowl license package includes a \$2 certificate, \$13 general game and habitat stamp, and an \$85 waterfowl license, totaling \$100. Waterfowl includes geese, ducks, swans, brant, rails and coots.

14-Day Waterfowl Licenses – The nonresident waterfowl license is for 14 days, or two seven-day periods, and a nonresident may have only one waterfowl license per year. The seven-day statewide waterfowl license option was eliminated by lawmakers.

Nonresident Small Game Hunting Licenses –

This \$85 license is needed for hunting pheasants, grouse, partridge, doves, woodcock, cranes, crows, and tree squirrels. The nonresident upland game bird package is \$2 for a certificate, \$13 for a general game and habitat license and \$85 for the small game license, totaling \$100.

One 10-Day Period or Two Five-Day Segments –

The nonresident small game license is now a 10-day license. It can be for 10 consecutive days or for two five-day periods. Unlike the waterfowl license, nonresidents may purchase as many of these licenses as they want.

Early September Canada Goose Season –

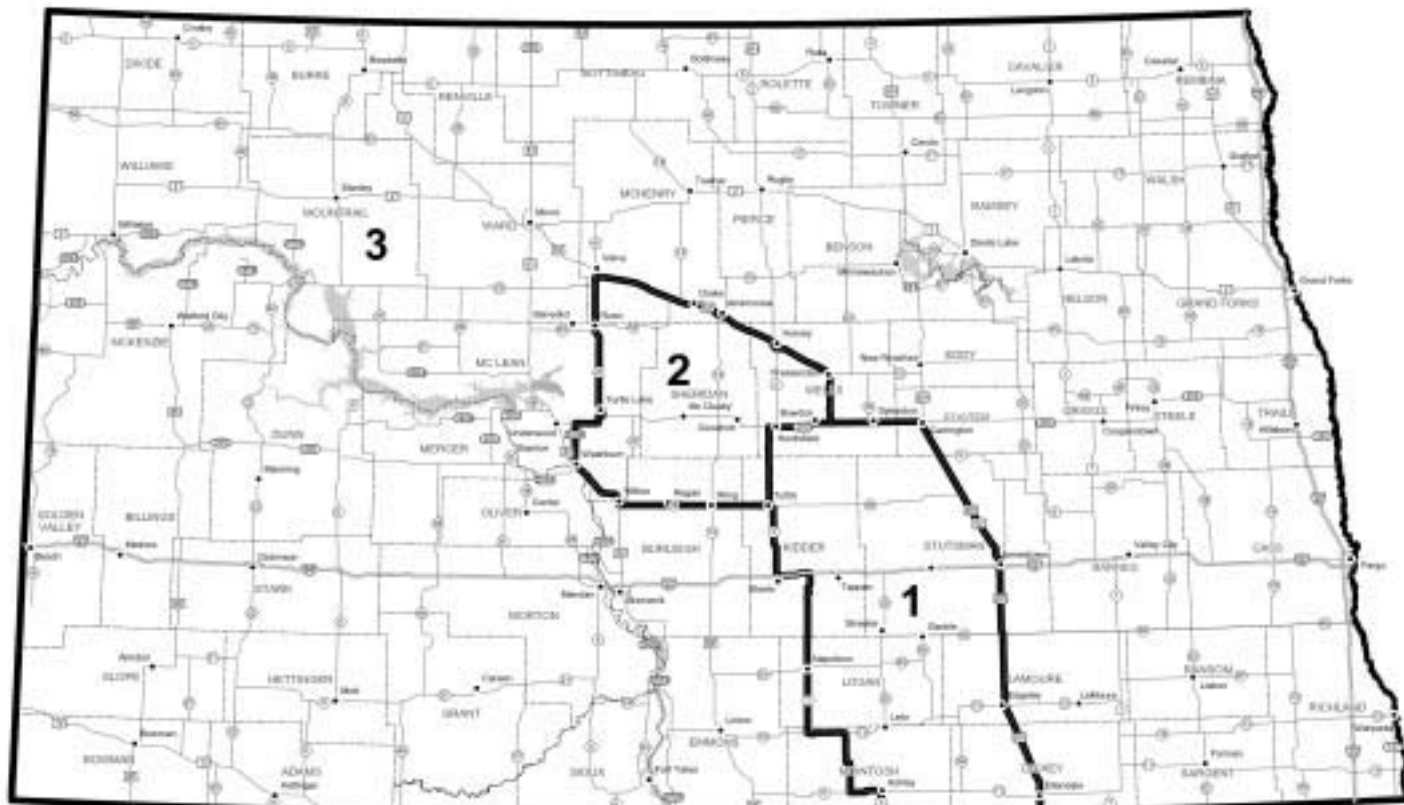
Nonresidents can hunt during the early September Canada goose season in Sargent and Richland counties without counting against their 14-day regular season allotment. Nonresidents who hunt in other counties during this season would have at least a seven-day period count against their 14-day license.

Habitat License Fee Increase –

The habitat stamp fee was increased from \$5 to \$10 this year. The additional money from this increase is dedicated to the Private Land Open To Sportsmen program. This fee increase also pertains to resident hunters. The combination or sportsmen's license fee does not increase this year, but will increase by \$5 dollars in 2004 – from \$27 to \$32.

Big Game Fees – The nonresident big game license increased to \$200, with \$45 to be used for the Private Land Initiative, while the nonresident deer gun license fee dropped to \$50 for licenses sold after the second deer gun lottery.

North Dakota NONRESIDENT WATERFOWL HUNTING ZONES



As part of the Governor's proclamation, three zones have been established for nonresident waterfowl hunters this fall. There is no limit on the number of licenses for each zone. Nonresidents who choose zones 1 or 2 may hunt that zone for only one 7-day period during the season. Those who opt to hunt in zone 1 or 2 and wish to utilize the full 14 days allowed must use the other 7 days in zone 3. Nonresidents cannot hunt both zones 1 and 2 during the season. Hunters in zone 3 can hunt that zone the entire 14 days.